

# When it goes wrong ... learning from challenged (and revived) community initiatives



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## ABSTRACT

Both in academia and practice there is an increasing interest for community initiatives. Examples of best practices are often discussed and reproduced. However, there is little attention for the failure of such initiatives. Failed, or seriously challenged initiatives now remain invisible, as the initiators fear stigmatisation and the outcomes do not sell the potential of community initiatives policy-makers and academics envision. From earlier empirical research, after the development of community initiatives in depopulating regions, a significant number of bottom-up projects was identified that experienced serious problems and, in some cases, failed. The aim of this paper is to deconstruct context, causes and consequences for challenged initiatives. In this paper four challenged initiatives from Sweden and The Netherlands are discussed. It appeared that, in dealing with financial, bureaucratic, democratic and organisational challenges, most communities recovered gradually. By acknowledging the existence of failure, we can learn from their resilience and social learning. In conclusion several recommendations for practice are discussed, to provide institutional space for challenged community initiatives.

## 1. Introduction

Community initiatives are in the spotlight of both policy research and practices. Case studies of citizens planning and implementing their own initiatives increasingly have been published since the past decade, in both community and (rural) development studies (Boonstra, 2016; Li et al., 2017). Also, from the perspective of planning practice and public administration there seems to be an increasing interest in community initiatives (Bisschops and Beunen, 2018; Curry, 2012). Especially in depopulating or marginal rural areas, where governmental plan-making is expensive and unrewarding, responsibilities are increasingly outsourced to the level of citizens (Meijer and van der Krabben, 2018). In such areas the capacities of communities in developing such initiatives, their resilience in dealing with decline, and the potential of endogenous development is praised (Feldhoff, 2013; Haase et al., 2012; Hospers, 2014).

However, what most of these studies have in common is a bias towards positive experiences and successful initiatives (Talò et al., 2014; Wandersman, 2009). Examples of best practices are often discussed and reproduced. The conditions for success are summarized in catchy abbreviations like the CLEAR model<sup>2</sup> by Lowndes et al. (2006) or the Dutch ACTIE list<sup>3</sup> (Denters et al., 2013). Though there is truth in these lists, they do not fully cover the complexity of planning and

implementing a community initiative. Especially when things not go according to plan, simplified good practices hardly are of assistance for challenged communities (Cooke and Kothari, 2001; Scott and Teasdale, 2012).

The promotion of good practices is discursive according to Vettoretto (2009). To allow others to learn from success and facilitate 'policy transfer', indicators for success are generalized and become part of a universal story or how community-led planning should be done. Vettoretto (2009) criticizes this focus on good practice:

“As a result, a good practice is cleansed of the political dimension of policy-making and of the historically defined local social and cultural differences. In the repertoires, local actions do not seem associated with any significant conflict, doubts regarding principles or uncertainties. Such issues may be present in interactive processes of confrontation and production, but they disappear from formal representations.”

(Vettoretto, 2009, p. 1079, p. 1079)

Other authors claim that community initiatives and practices of self-organisation are difficult to generalize from (Agger and Jensen, 2015; Hou and Kinoshita, 2007; Shucksmith, 2010). The planning process of such initiatives is characterized by local social structures, the networks initiators are part of, path dependencies and coincidental encounters.

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<sup>2</sup> CLEAR stands for: Can do, Like to, Enabled to, Asked to, Responded to. These are factors that stimulate citizens to engage with community initiatives. .

<sup>3</sup> citizens start initiatives when there is sufficient *Animo* (eagerness), *Contacten* (contacts), *Toerusting* (capacity), *Inbedding* (embeddedness), *Empathie* (empathy from facilitating policy-makers).

As Boonstra (2016, p. 372) claims in her thesis: community initiatives are “often small, local, specific, and contextual.” Even though there is a broad consensus that community initiatives are specific and their success often depends on local variables, the production of good practices prevails in community development studies (de Haan et al., 2017a). In this respect, deconstructing the context, causes and consequences of challenged initiatives can be insightful and further increase our understandings of the complexity of community initiatives (Bisschops and Beunen, 2018; Sitkin, 1992).

Nevertheless, unsuccessful or challenged community initiatives are difficult research subjects, as they are difficult to approach and tend to remain invisible. The initiators of failed or seriously challenged initiatives often fear stigmatisation and are rather not associated with what went wrong. Furthermore, almost every planning process consists of rough and smooth patches (Forester, 1993). However, people tend to idealize the planning process as soon as the project is finished. Doing so, new narratives are constructed that highlight the positive aspects and gradually fade out negative experiences (Mellahi and Wilkinson, 2004). In academia and practice unsuccessful initiatives are underrepresented, since the outcome of such initiatives does not sell the potential of community initiatives policy-makers and academics envision (Scott and Teasdale, 2012).

This paper highlights the importance of studying and acknowledging failure in the case of community-led planning. However, it is not the aim of the paper to define precisely whether communities have failed or not. This paper seeks for ways to pay attention to unsuccessful initiatives and learn from all the (dark) grey areas in between success and failure, by broadening the scope of currently researched initiatives. From earlier empirical research, after the development of community initiatives in depopulating areas in Sweden and The Netherlands, a significant number of bottom-up projects was identified that experienced serious problems and, in some cases, failed (Meijer, 2018; Meijer and Syssner, 2017). The aim of this paper is to deconstruct and learn from the context, causes and consequences of challenged initiatives. In this paper four challenged community initiatives from Sweden and The Netherlands are discussed: these communities were unable to materialize their ideas or had to deal with serious drawbacks (severe financial losses, lawsuits, conflicts) during the planning process. Nevertheless, in dealing with financial, democratic, bureaucratic and organisational challenges, most of the studied communities recovered gradually and some eventually did establish successful initiatives. By acknowledging the existence of failure, we can learn from their resilience and the social learning that took place in these communities.

This paper continues as follows: in Section 2 paper I will discuss the dynamics of community initiatives. Section 3 provides a theoretical background for studying the success and failure of community initiatives. In Section 4 I refer shortly to the research methods. In Section 5 the narratives of four challenged initiatives are presented, followed by a discussion (Section 6). The concluding Section (7) discusses several recommendations, to provide institutional space for challenged civic initiatives.

## 2. The dynamics of community initiatives in depopulating rural contexts

Since the 1960's, several groups in society pleaded for a larger embedding of citizen voices in plans developed by governments (Allmendinger, 2002). The youngest generation of participatory planning is marked by self-organised community initiatives. Instead of consumers of spatial planning, citizens have become critical producers as well. This movement goes beyond government-led planning, since citizens and communities take the lead and implement planning initiatives themselves (Boonstra, 2016; Healey, 2006; Nederhand et al., 2016). Ideally community initiatives contribute to social cohesion and the liveability in a cost effective way, but also could help preventing degeneration (like finding new uses for empty buildings, or maintain

valuable landscapes) (Li et al., 2017; Meijer and van der Krabben, 2018). Concrete examples of community-led planning initiatives are developing village plans, building community centers, maintenance of landscape, community gardens, care or sports accommodations, touristic and recreational facilities, restoration of cultural heritage sites, etc.

Depopulating regions are regarded as frontrunners when it comes to the performance of community-led planning (Hospers, 2014; Roca et al., 2016). This study concentrates on two predominantly rural regions in Sweden and The Netherlands: Östergötland and De Achterhoek. Both regions are confronted with the effects of depopulation: young people leave rural areas; the population is ageing, and governments find it increasingly difficult to allocate sufficient resources to small villages and hamlets (Syssner and Meijer, 2017). In a significant number of such places citizens stepped in and took over community services or developed new initiatives by themselves.

In Sweden and the Netherlands depopulation, and especially how to deal with it, is heavily debated (Syssner and Hospers, 2018). Scholars and planning professionals increasingly argue that answers need to be sought in exploring deregulation and more informal ways of planning (Hospers, 2010; Korsten and Goedvolk, 2008). Within this respect community initiatives are moved forward as a panacea for dealing with the negative consequences of decline.

Conversely, the debate within rural development studies increasingly focusses on the complex nature of community-led initiatives and moves beyond the community as panacea for rural problems (Salemink et al., 2017; Shortall, 2008; Skerratt, 2013). There is a growing interest for the complexities and downsides of community-led practices, in contrast to the earlier advocated rural idyll and communities as protagonists of social cohesion and unity (Shucksmith, 2018). Instead, mechanisms of exclusion, conflict, control and overexploitation of the social capacities of a community are increasingly topics of rural research (Curry, 2012; Salemink et al., 2017; Shucksmith, 2018). According to Barrett (2015) rural communities can be regarded as diverse and complex social groups, that share identity, interests and normativity, but are also ridden through these dynamics. Challenges and shared problems can be powerful in uniting communities, but also pull them apart: not all identify in the same ways with a place or problem, and interests or norms about how problems should be tackled can diverge and become a cause of conflicts (Salemink et al., 2017).

## 3. Theorising failure (and success) of community initiatives

Understanding challenges and failure of community initiatives is inevitably connected with understanding success. Often the lack of success is indicator for failure, or vice versa. Though a theory of failure of community initiatives hardly exists and this remains an understudied field of research, several authors have attempted to explore indicators of failure and success in systematic ways (Helmig et al., 2014; McConnell, 2010; Scott and Teasdale, 2012; Seibel, 1996; Sitkin, 1992). In the coming sections the dimensions of failure and success at community level are explored theoretically. I do so by drawing on from studies on failure of non-profit organisations and governments. Studies on organisational failure tend to take two directions: there is an organisational perspective on failure, that focusses on aspects of failure that are internal to organisations (Gillespie and Dietz, 2009; Mellahi and Wilkinson, 2004); and there is an evolutionary understanding on failure, that focusses on the environmental dimension of failure and organisational resilience (McConnell, 2010; Scott and Teasdale, 2012). In section 3.1 The combination of these two perspectives, and their implications for studying failure at community level, is discussed. Section 3.2 provides a contrasting view on the interpretation of failure and success, based on empirical research after policy and governmental failure (McConnell, 2015). Section 3.3 concludes how both views contradict and complement each other.

### 3.1. The multiple dimensions of organisational failure: input, output, transformations and bottom-lines

Failure is not an easily defined status for community initiatives. Where organisational failure of businesses is often related to financial loss or bankruptcy, such bottom lines hardly exist for communities (Drucker, 2012). Rather than on pure economic indicators, failure and success of a community initiative, is based on other, more social indicators. For village organisations the success often depends on whether they have achieved their (social) goals or had reached the right people. In their publication, Helmig et al. (2014) explored the multiple dimensions of organisational failure (and success) for non-profit organisations (NPO's), such as a village board representing community interests, in a systematic way. Through a literature review they mapped different categories of how failure and success of NPO's is understood in scientific literature. Besides financial performance and bankruptcy these categories include stakeholder performance (satisfaction, reputation), survival, efficiency (productivity, operational performance) and mission accomplishment. Nevertheless Helmig et al. (2014) state in one of their findings, that research on organisational failure still is dominated by financial performance and organisational death (that is when an organisation ceases to exist). According to them not profit, but goal achievement and other soft indicators are more suitable to define the success of non-profit organisations.

Measuring success and failure of NPO's and communities is an ambiguous endeavor. For a more transparent understanding of success and failure Helmig et al. (2014) introduce a model that focusses on the transformation of resources (see Fig. 1). To reach certain ends (such as mission accomplishment, social cohesion or prevent decline), inputs must be transformed into an output (e.g. a community center). These inputs can be various things: financial resources like subsidies, but also volunteers, capable organizers or the acquisition of land. The transformation of inputs into an output is a crucial dimension for measuring the success. If inputs cannot be transformed, due to inefficiency, adequate project plans or non-compliance with statutory planning, an organisation hardly can be regarded as successful (Gunn et al., 2015; Owen et al., 2007). A fourth dimension of the model consists of the 'environment'. The environment includes indicators such as stakeholder satisfaction, legitimacy and public support. For understanding community performance this dimension is of crucial importance: if the wider community does not support the ideas for an initiative, the initiative is bound to fail, despite adequate resources, efficient transformation and mission accomplishment (Curry, 2012; Gkartzios and Norris, 2011).

This multidimensional model helps to understand the failure of organisations in a more integrated way, that overcomes the problems of one-dimensional explanations for failure like financial performance, or organisational death. However, this model also understands failure and success as a static and linear process, based on the performance of

single and clear-defined projects. Helmig et al. (2014) have based their findings on the study of NPO's, which are often communities of interest, rather than communities of place.

Communities have many similarities with non-profit organisations, and most cases they legally are NPO's as well: nearly all studied communities were represented by formal, legal bodies like a village organisation. However, unlike non-profit organisations communities have a holistic character and do not act in ways that are defined by statutes or mission statements, nor are they defined by the projects they perform. Rather a rural community is a social setting (Goodwin-Hawkins, 2016), and based on dynamic interactions between its inhabitants and their environment (Liepins, 2000). The death of a community (as the ultimate bottom-line for failure) is extremely rare. Conversely NPO's can very well be terminated, for example when their goals have been achieved or due to financial problems. To overcome these shortcomings of the multidimensional model on failure, an additional, constructive view on success and failure is discussed in the next section.

### 3.2. Understanding community failure as a social construct

McConnell (2010, 2015) observed the same limitations concerning research on failure as Helmig et al. (2014) did: the focus on tangible failures and the prominence of single case studies. However, McConnell focused his research on governmental and policy failure. More than Helmig et al. (2014), McConnell (2010) regards failure as a social construct. Like governments, communities have long time horizons and their failure is often relative and dependent on the how (and by whom) failure is perceived. According to McConnell (2010) four aspects should be considered when studying failure as a social construct: (1) failure is relational (the perception of failure is context dependent), (2) a matter of degree (failure can be partial or complete), (3) time-dependent (at what moment is a failure perceived as a failure) and (4) requires someone to classify a failure as such. For studying community failure these aspects have the following implications:

*First*, that failure is relational implies that the perception of failure is always in relation to something: for example, in relation to expected output, the (extra) time that was needed to realize a project (and the patience of the community) or the reception of the ideas within the wider community or local government (the environmental dimension in the words of Helmig et al.). Depending on these contextual circumstances, that cannot always be influenced from within the community, a community initiative is regarded as a failure or success, or something in between.

*Second*, failure is nearly always a matter of degree: McConnell (2015) distinguishes tolerable failures (or resilient success: a second best and tolerable option is implemented), conflicted failures (or conflicted success: the initiative is controversial) and outright failures (or marginal success: goals are not achieved and support for the initiative is virtually non-existent).

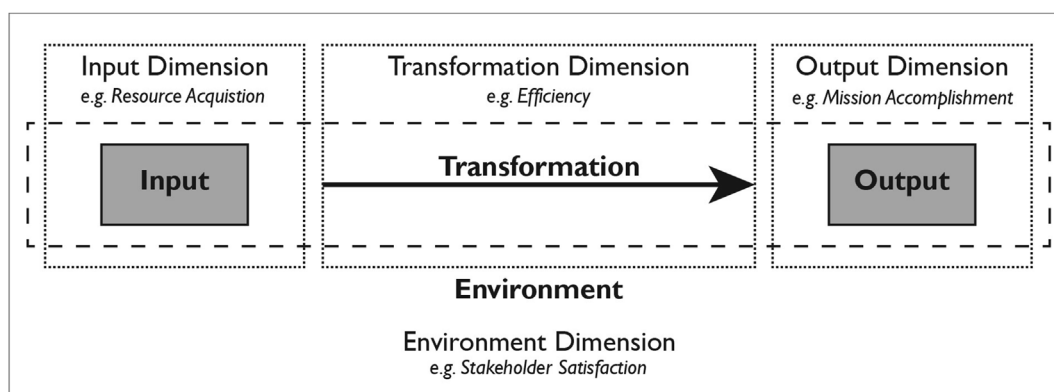


Fig. 1. Dimensions of NPO success (from Helmig et al. (2014)).

*Third*, the perception of failure is time-dependent: depending on when an initiative is evaluated it is classified as a (partial) failure or not: an unused community center may find a new destination after time, budget overspending can become relative if new pools of resources are opened up or if an initiative leads to increased social cohesion over time (Kay, 2017). Especially in the case of community initiatives the planning of projects is often very flexible and ad hoc: specific opportunities (for funding, vacant buildings) come and go, just as every generation has its own needs and desires (Meijer and Syssner, 2017).

And *fourth* as McConnell (2015, p. 222) writes: the act of classifying a failure as such is ‘bound up with issues of politics and power, including contested views about its existence, and the power to produce an authoritative and accepted failure narrative’. From earlier research it appeared that communities fear power imbalances and exclusion as a consequence of failed or conflicted initiatives (Ellickson, 1991; Holman and Rydin, 2013; Walsh, O’Shea, Scharf and Shucksmith, 2014). Failure is therefore also a controversial topic and not easily classified as such from within the community. Outsiders, conversely, often have incomplete information and find it difficult to pinpoint failed community initiatives (de Haan et al., 2017b). Contrawise, communities also can classify themselves as successful, even while facing financial trouble and being inefficient (Meyer and Zucker, 1989; Seibel, 1996). Helmig et al. (2014) mention that such organisations can be regarded as ‘successful failures’, that continue to survive for political reasons:

“Undertaking services of public interests governments cannot or do not want to provide, many NPOs are financially supported by the state as long as demand exists for their services. As such, NPO survival is artificially constructed. This prevents [financial success] from being an objective criterion for NPO success”

(Helmig et al., 2014, p. 1513, p. 1513)

Also, communities generally receive financial and political support for building and maintaining their initiatives. Local governments subsidize village boards, grant funds for individual projects and often pay for the exploitation of community-owned meeting places. As such, also the success of community initiatives depends on the willingness of governments to support community development and is artificially constructed (de Haan et al., 2017a).

### 3.3. Synthesis

The classification of a community initiative that failed to deliver initiatives, or to enhance social cohesion and livability, is complicated. In section 3.1 a model that deconstructs the causes of failure is discussed, based on insights from organisational studies. Section 3.2 provided a meta-level interpretation of failure, focused on the context and definition of failure. Both views are contradictory as well as complementary. Within organisational studies, failure is generally discussed as absolute: due to various reasons (input, output, transformation or environment) projects were unable to reach successful implementation. Failure as social construct provides a view that contradicts the linearity of failure: it depends on when and by whom a failure is regarded as such. Furthermore this view adds that failure very well can be a temporal or conflicted state of being. Both views complement each other in the sense that they highlight different aspects of failure: Helmig et al. (2014) provide insight in concrete causes of failure, while McConnell (2010) highlights the importance of interpretation and context. Yet, the consequences of failure at community level are often unclear as McConnell (2010) points out, especially in the long run. Next to the causes and contexts of failure, the coming empirical sections further look into the consequences of failure as it occurs at community level.

## 4. Methods

From earlier empirical research, after the planning capacities of

rural communities and their interactions with governmental bodies, eleven bottom-up projects were visited in Östergötland and De Achterhoek. From this initial case selection 4 initiatives could be identified that experienced serious problems and, in some cases, failed. These initiatives have been revisited for this study. For a more detailed discussion concerning the selection of case study regions, and their contextual dynamics see (Meijer, 2018; Meijer and Syssner, 2017) as well. Below the conditions for case study comparison, the initial data gathering process, and the case selection for this research manuscript are discussed into more detail.

### 4.1. Case study comparison

Comparative research can take many forms. This research can be placed within an interpretive tradition (Yanow, 2013), which is focused at the interpretation of comparative phenomena in their specific context, while deriving generalisations about mechanisms that shape the development of these phenomena: in this case the failure and revival of community initiatives in a rural context (Lowe, 2012; Ragin, 1987). By acknowledging the differences and similarities in the two case study regions, simplification in the analysis, and the risks of both false particularisation (i.e. the belief that all cases are unique) and false universalism (i.e. the belief that all cases are similar) are avoided (Sartori, 1991). The contextual dynamics of the cases, at regional and local level, are briefly introduced below.

The original empirical research was conducted in Östergötland in Sweden and De Achterhoek The Netherlands (Meijer and Syssner, 2017). Both regions have very different geographic and institutional settings. Östergötland is much less densely populated compared to De Achterhoek (respectively 41 inh. per km<sup>2</sup> and 257 inh. per km<sup>2</sup>), and distances to services as schools, sports centers or health care are much longer here. On the other hand, the average municipal budget is nearly three times higher in Östergötland (6347 € per inhabitant, per year), compared to the Achterhoek (€ 2510). Also, population decline and community participation is perceived very differently in both countries. In the Achterhoek population decline is tackled proactively, with policies aimed at stimulating citizens to take over governmental facilities (Meijer and van der Krabben, 2018). In Östergötland hardly any specific policies were developed to tackle problems due to depopulation. Furthermore though there is much attention for participatory planning, community initiatives remain invisible at the level of local or higher level governments (Wänström, 2013). Because of the traditional welfare state, service allocation and planning are perceived task of local governments. This does however not mean that services are maintained in rural communities: most municipalities opt for centralisation of services in larger towns (Syssner, 2016). As a result, still, a significant number of communities choose to develop or take over services themselves instead.

At community level, many similarities could be observed among the visited communities. In both regions communities have formal, bottom-up initiated, representative bodies (such as village organisations, byalaget or dorpsraden) that hold contact with local governments and other authorities, and take the lead concerning the development of initiatives (Meijer, 2018). Furthermore, the styles of decision-making, leadership, volunteering and the types and size of projects varied, but the differences at regional level were not significant: both regions showed a variation of extensive, well managed and volunteer-rich community initiatives, and struggling communities with difficulties accessing the right funds or the right people. Though the discussed failures largely are a result of local settings and decisions made at community level, they are not specific for the studied regions: insufficient governmental support, lack of financial resources and conflicted communities were present in both regions. Therefore, a comparison of challenges and failures at community level across both case study regions is feasible.



## 4.2. Initial data gathering

For the initial research, short term ethnographic field work was done to collect data in both countries (Pink and Morgan, 2013; Schatzman and Strauss, 1973). The field work consisted of identifying community initiatives via snowball sampling (Atkinson and Flint, 2001), interviewing the key initiators and field visits to selected communities. To identify community initiatives first gatekeepers, community development oriented NGO's like Hela Sverige Ska Leva, Gelderse Federatie van Kleine Kernen en Dorpsuizen and Leader Local Action Groupswere contacted. Also, websites by village organisations were searched for community initiatives. This provided me with 11 examples of rural communities that were actively planning activities with a collective interest, which had a spatial impact, and were initiated and performed by non-governmental actors. First, in-depth open interviews were conducted with key initiators and volunteers from within the selected communities. Together with the interviewees the project sites have been visited. This proved to be a good method to observe the actual state of the project, and to ask additional questions about more sensitive issues like the details of difficulties within the planning process. Additional data gathering consisted of interviews with involved policy makers at local and regional governments, and with involved NGO's. To prevent language barriers and to make cross-cultural interpretation possible, a local research assistant was appointed for the field work in Östergötland. This research assistant accompanied field visits and made translations during the interviews. In addition, 'situated knowers' (Yanow, 2013) were consulted to discuss interview results and to verify early interpretations: in this case fellow researchers from the host universities during the field periods. Finally, policy documents (such as comprehensive and framework plans), newspaper articles and community websites have been consulted to collect background information.

## 4.3. Revisiting challenged initiatives

The initial selection process for case study material had a strong bias towards successful community initiatives: communities that were actively organised, could be accessed through contact persons and information on their websites, and those that had running or even completed projects to visit, were approached first. The interviews with key initiators and field visits however revealed that not all communities (always) have been successful. During all interviews questions have been asked about experienced problems or difficulties, things that went wrong and what initiators would do differently for future projects. It turned out that most communities experienced some obstruction in realising their initiatives: they struggled with bureaucracy, accessing the right funds or had issues of representation. Others faced more severe problems like financial deficits, unsolved conflicts or lawsuits. For this article the four most severely challenged communities have been re-visited: Iisviken, Groenbeek, Grönby and Prolongereren. Respectively these communities dealt with financial, democratic, bureaucratic and organisational challenges. Two of these communities (Grönby and Prolongereren) have been unable to materialize their ideas into realised projects, their initiatives have been unsuccessful. The other two selected communities (Iisviken and Groenbeek) did establish projects, but met larger challenges than the other initially studied communities: they faced severe financial deficits, conflict or lawsuits. Table 1 summarizes the number of interviews that was held within the four challenged communities, and with external stakeholders: municipal civil servants (responsible for rural or community development) and locally involved NGO's. With external stakeholders I discussed the circumstances for developing community initiatives, possibilities and limitations of support and their awareness of failed or challenged initiatives. To avoid stigmatisation and to protect the communities from negative associations, synonyms have been used to discuss the communities. The actual place names of Iisviken, Grönby, Prolongereren, Groenbeek, Groterdam,

**Table 1**

Number of interviews within cases selected for this research article.

	Interviews within community	Interviews with external stakeholders
Iisviken (SE)	2	3
Grönby (SE)	3	
Prolongereren (NL)	2	4
Groenbeek (NL)	2	

Västerdalen and De Beek are known with the author.

Though the challenges these communities met are extremes of what was generally found among the broader study of community initiatives, they are also paradigmatic for the failure of community initiatives and their revival. An interpretative analysis was performed to analyse the context, causes and consequences of the challenges these communities met (Schwartz-Shea and Yanow, 2012; Yanow, 2013). In the coming section the narratives of each community and the experienced failure is discussed.

## 5. Results: 4 cases of challenged initiatives

### 5.1. Iisviken: financially challenged

One of the projects visited in Sweden was an ice hockey hall in Iisviken, built by the local ice hockey and sports club Iisvikens IF. Iisviken is a small town (nearly 3000 inh.) in a municipality of the same name (7.900 inh.) at the coast of Östergötland (Statistics Sweden, 2016). Iisvikens IF is the largest association within the municipality and covers all popular sports practices in Iisviken. For a relatively small community building an indoor ice hockey hall is a rather extensive project, in fact it is one of the largest within the region. Unfortunately, it is also this project that caused financial problems for the sports club.

Since 2002 the general board had repeatedly submitted a subsidy request for building an indoor ice hockey stadium. With this stadium training facilities could be improved and extended. This subsidy request was declined for several times, until the proposal was (unexpectedly) approved in 2010. With EU LEADER funds the club was enabled to build a long desired indoor ice hockey rink. This appeared to be an expensive and risky operation. One of the current board members explained that when they started the building, it appeared that the initial request was outdated and contained some serious errors. As a result, insufficient budget was calculated to finish the stadium properly. In 2014 the structure of the stadium was finished, and funds were lacking to complete the indoors. However, due to the payment terms for LEADER projects, the ice hockey hall needs to be completed as was stated in the project proposal. Otherwise the allocated funds need to be repaid. Following a linear view on failure, the sports club failed in acquiring sufficient resources, and in efficient transformation of these resources into a completed project.

The municipality of Iisviken is the legal owner of the property and pays for maintenance and electricity costs. However, Iisviken is a small municipality, with a declining population. Also, at municipal level finances are lacking to support the ice hockey stadium. Furthermore, ice hockey is a popular but also male-dominated sport in Sweden. Extra support for the ice hockey stadium does not fit the municipal policy to advance participation of women and minorities and has been put on hold.

Yet, there is hope. The board members who had submitted the subsidy request resigned. A new generation of capable and well-connected members took over their positions. They have recognized the need for diversification and set up a new training program to attract young girls and children from immigrant families as well. The current chairman is a financial manager in his professional life. He is certainly not without hope and sees a prosperous future for the club. So far, the club has been able to repair some of the financial deficits with help

from a savings bank, turning the tide from an outright failure to a conflicted success. However, when visited in 2015, the club still was a 1.000.000 SEK (nearly € 100.000) short on their budget. He does not blame his predecessors for this loss:

“This is a pretty advanced project, and you need to be a professional to manage it. However, clubs and associations do not always have the resources to do so. We are amateurs, so the result is likely to be amateuristic.”

The chair feels that his predecessors should have received more support and guidance during the process, for example from the funding agency. Also, he thinks that a professional should check the feasibility of projects, before granting large budgets and alongside the risks of a large project.

### 5.2. Grönby: democratically (institutionally) challenged

Grönby (Östergötland) was an independent municipality until a local government reorganisation took place in 1973. Currently the community of Grönby (200 inh.) is still defined by the boundaries of the former municipality. Consequently, the community is dispersed and consists of several localities with diverging interests. When the closing of the local primary school was announced, the village board of Grönby was established to organize collective action more efficiently. After a few years of insecurity, the school was not closed by the municipality. This, however did not cause disbandance of the village board. As a result, the village board was left without a clear project or future vision. From time to time the village board members pick up a project. However, the board members lack mandate from the wider community, that still holds on to their diverging interests. Without widespread community support, the board finds difficulty in realising projects. So far, the idea to unite Grönby into one zip code area, and the implementation of broad band internet has been unsuccessful because of insufficient local support. Here the crucial importance of the environmental dimension comes to the light. No matter how well-thought-out the initiatives were, without stakeholder acceptance the projects are bound to fail.

Now, the village board has set its hope on reopening its local train stop. Like many minor stops in Sweden, this train stop was closed in 1970, due to efficiency measures. Unlike other initiatives of the village board, this initiative does have a strong and widespread local support. Reconnecting the village of Grönby to the railway network would mean a serious reduction of travel time to the nearby city of Västerdalen and Sweden's capital Stockholm. The village board discovered via contacts at the Swedish Railway Authority that technically it should be possible to reinstall a train stop. Currently the train stops in Grönby for 10 min to let the train from the other direction pass, but without opening the doors. As a publicity stunt, the board arranged to let the train open its doors in Grönby and went in with several dozen inhabitants. For the chairman of the village board the train stop is a key project, it would not only result in a faster connection, but also would function as a catalyst for other developments within the community:

“My dream is actually that if we could just make the train stop and open the doors, it would open the doors to a lot of new other activities as well. Not only people moving here, but you could increase tourism to introduce them to look at our river and to see beavers and other wildlife.”

Chairman of Village Board Grönby

Though technically possible, reopening the train stop is a complicated project that not only depends on the engagement of the community. The train line is part of a large institutional network: It is the national railway authority together with regional governments that decides about the number of train stops and their locations. Also, all other municipalities along the railway line have a say in the decision-making process. So far, the railway authority is not in favor of adding a

train stop and claims it costs are too high. These decisions are beyond the control of the community. Yet the community persists, and found support from the local government: the municipality of Västerdalen, headed a regional news paper in 2017. However, if the efforts of the community are rewarded remains to be seen. Both the regional government of Östergötland and the railway authority remain against reopening the train stop.

### 5.3. Groenbeek: bureaucratically challenged

Groenbeek is a small, but well-organised village (1100 inh) in De Achterhoek. Like the members of Iisvikens IF the village board of Groenbeek aspired to a new sports accommodation for their community. When the sports accommodation was realised a multi-functional community center was added, by renovating the old sports canteen. However, before implementation both projects were seriously challenged in bureaucratic and juridical ways.

Though the sports accommodation received widespread support from their community, several neighbors disagreed with the location of the accommodation and feared the impact on their living environment. As soon as the plans were announced publicly (as part of the procedure for adjusting the land allocation plan), the neighbors united their protest and made formal objections to every aspect of the plan, at all possible levels. When their objections were declined by the municipality, the neighbors continued their protests by taking the matter to court. In March 2010, twelve years after the first plans were announced, the Dutch Council of State dismissed the last objection. A regional newspaper calculated that this whole process took 8000 man-hours, five years delay, and nearly 20 blue prints. Nevertheless, in 2011 volunteers and a local building company started building the sports accommodation. The initiators felt relieved they had won over these bureaucratic challenges and finally could realize their long aspired sports accommodation. However, the conflict with the neighbors left its marks within the community. One of the initiators comments on these consequences:

“I play tennis with one of the objecting neighbors. That was occasionally very inconvenient. Sometimes the conflict was mentioned, but we never discussed it in detail. It is his right to protest, but I also believe that protests only should be made when they make sense, and not because people stick to protesting. There was a group of 6 or 7 objectors that didn't want to let go, so they went to court together. [...] Now, some of them still don't talk with anyone in the village.”  
(project leader of sports accommodation)

When the sports accommodation was built the village board of Groenbeek focused on a new project. Also, this project was challenged by bureaucratic processes. Faced with population and economic decline the municipality of Groterdam, where Groenbeek belongs to, realised rigorous budget cuts were necessary. As a policy experiment the municipality outsourced the library service to community level: libraries were no longer maintained by the municipality, but villages could take them over and were stimulated to do so via a subsidy scheme (*Gemeente Berkelland, 2015*). In Groenbeek, citizens wanted to combine a library with other facilities in a community center.

After the completion of the new sports accommodation and a newly installed large sports canteen, the former football canteen had become vacant. According to the project team, the vacant canteen was an ideal location to combine a community center with a library facility. However, as soon as the community of Groenbeek finished their application for the library subsidy, the funding was capped. Other communities had less elaborate plans and were able to submit their proposals before. Groenbeek now feels punished for the time they invested in a well-defined project proposal and blames the local government for not allocating sufficient budgets.

This was not the only setback Groenbeek had to deal with. Around the same time, the municipality decided not to prolong the perennial

financial contribution (of € 30.000 a year) for the exploitation of the sports accommodation. This arrangement was made by the previous coalition and not prolonged after the elections. The community was astonished, and brought the matter to court:

“We ended at the judge in administrative law in Arnhem. A year we have spent on prosecution, with a lawyer and made many costs. The judge sustained our claim but could not give the municipality a rap over the knuckles, as this was only possible in civil law. We told each other: another year, another lawyer, we cannot afford that as a community ...”

(initiator of sports accommodation)

Nevertheless, Groenbeek was not defeated. Every challenge was conquered with determination to realize the projects they envisioned. For the library the project team decided search for other financial resources and applied for other funds and sponsors. Successfully, in 2011 they were granted the award for best project proposal (awarded by Stichting Kern met Pit) and were able to realize the community center as well. The example of Groenbeek demonstrates the relationality and time-dependence of failure and success, but also the flexibility and resilience of a community initiative. When Stichting Kern met Pit announced the nomination of Groenbeek for best project proposal in 2011, the bureaucratic challenges, remained unmentioned. However, it is unlikely all neighbors share this success story, it remains a conflicted success.

#### 5.4. Prolongeren: organisationally challenged

Prolongeren is a small village (480 inh) in De Achterhoek nearby the German border. The village is split in two by the river de Beek. De Beek does not only physically split the community, but also socially: The Northern bank is the domain of the Protestant church, while the Catholic church community is located South of the De Beek. Due to social and political compartmentalisation, both church communities hardly merged in the past (see Post (1989)). Nowadays, religion barely plays a role in the daily lives of Prolongeren's inhabitants, yet the division into two church communities seems to be persistent. Nevertheless, the village board of Prolongeren (a bottom-up organisation established to represent all inhabitants) aspires to a united community to increase local self-organisation capacity and resilience, in times of population decline.

Uniting two church communities is not the only challenge the village board is facing. Also, Prolongeren knows 27 different associations that are run by volunteers. Though this number is not unusual for a Dutch rural community, the activities of these associations take place in 9 different locations. All buildings are maintained by volunteers, with support from either one of the churches or the local government. The village board foresees that maintaining all localities and facilities will not be feasible in the long run. Especially since the community is faced with population decline and formerly governmental activities (such as library and other social facilities) are increasingly outsourced towards community level. To overcome these challenges the village board aspires to a collective community center. Though renovating and expanding one of the church centers would be a plausible solution, ideally this community center is located at the sports park in between both parts of the village. In this community center the activities of diverse associations can be united, which increases its efficiency. But more important is that the community center can function as a meeting place for all community members and stimulate social cohesion.

Yet, communications with diverse associations did not result in anything concrete. Most associations and community members seem to be satisfied with the current situation, wherein they have their own individual buildings and canteens. Especially those volunteering for the existing community centers of both churches do not experience a necessity to change the status quo.

Like Grönby, the village board of Prolongeren believes that with a

concrete proposal and funding they can convince and unite other community members of their plans. The village board has been working on that since 2013. Nevertheless, navigating through municipal bureaucracies and finding funding appears to be difficult:

“Governmental organisations have fixed budgets, is my impression. And these budgets must be spent before certain dates. So, in the end, you need a well formulated plan, with support from the community, and find a budget for it. Somewhere ... I think that is how it works ...”

However, they [the municipality] always asks for new plans and have a high turnover of staff. So, if you have a contact person today, and then politics change, departments are reorganized, and you get another contact person. I think this can be arranged more efficiently as well ...”

(Village board member of Prolongeren)

For the village board finding a budget is an important input variable to convince the wider community of their plans. However, the local government and NGO's like the ‘association for small settlements’ (Gelderse Federatie voor Dorpshuizen en Kleine Kernen), expect local consensus and widespread community support for the plans, before they consider offering support or funding. Pinpointing a concrete cause for the inertia is difficult, however the village board regards the challenges they currently face as temporary and contextual.

## 6. Discussion

Above mentioned examples of challenged communities demonstrate the diversity and complexity of community initiatives. Single causes for the challenges are difficult to pinpoint, as most concerned a combination of organisational problems that are internal to communities (like the lack of planning capacity, insufficient social capital or conflict) and environmental factors that are external to communities (like ambiguous governmental policies or the lack of professional support). Where the constructive view on failure (McConnell, 2010) enables us to understand the relativeness of failure at community level and the resilience of communities in the long run, the multiple dimension model introduced by Helmig et al. (2014) provides more concrete explanations for what caused the challenges communities met: a lack of input, unsuccessful transformation, failing output or an environment that does not appreciate the result.

What all cases have in common is the presence of enthusiastic initiators that are reluctant to give up their ambitions. On the one hand these enthusiastic initiators provide a basic level of social capital and thereby input or potential to change. On the other hand, the examples also demonstrate that this enthusiasm not only stimulates but also can jeopardize social cohesion. Other researchers too have highlighted the thin line between building social capital and exclusion, and the impact of (contested) community leadership (Cornwall, 2008; Gray et al., 2006; Horlings and Padt, 2013). It is therefore not unreasonable that governments and NGO's expect (evidence for) widespread local consensus before allocating additional resources (like financial support). Nonetheless, in Grönby and Prolongeren it was also observed that some initiators believe local support for their ideas will be reached once concrete projects are realised; they find the wait-and-see attitude of governments frustrating. Also, other communities experienced application procedures for additional budgets or other forms of support to be inevitable, but also unreasonably demanding. For communities with low levels of social capital and that currently lack the capacity to act, application procedures have become a threshold to successfully develop initiatives.

The results show that past mistakes, conflicts or the lack of organisational power can have far reaching consequences. A financial deficit is not easily solved, and juridical procedures can become complex and never-ending processes. Nevertheless, none of the visited communities

claim to have failed. They all highlighted the temporary aspects of the challenges: eventually better times would come. In Iisviken and Groenbeek communities have been able to overcome most of the challenges and revived. Grönby and Prolongeren conversely have not been able to achieve their goals. In both cases shared problem ownership is lacking, but also the chosen solutions involve complex institutional and social arrangements. Following a linear organisational view on failure, one can say that the transformation of resources into project output has been unsuccessful for these communities. However, both communities also show potential to change: though local consensus and support from external stakeholders currently is lacking, this does not have to be a permanent situation. From a constructive view on failure it is therefore too early to conclude that both communities failed their mission for increased development opportunities and social cohesion. Moreover, from above cases and earlier research it became clear that communities can overcome challenges and turn the tide (Meijer et al., 2015; Meijer and Ernste, 2019; Meijer and Sysner, 2017). Unsuccessful projects are altered due to the influx of new resources (like a subsidy scheme) or replaced with fresh ideas from new inhabitants or younger generations.

## 7. Conclusion

“You build on failure. You use it as a stepping stone. Close the door on the past. You don't try to forget the mistakes, but you don't dwell on it.”

Johnny Cash

This study showed that failure of community initiatives is a relative phenomenon. It depends on when failure is observed and by whom it is perceived. For outsiders (like governments) failure of a community initiative is often invisible, as challenged communities lack successful projects to display or networks to apply for support and become visible. Insiders on the other hand can differ in opinion about the challenges they met: some claim the successful implementation of a project, others perceive the loss of their view as the main result. From the theoretical frame and discussed case studies we have learned that failure is complex: the lack of successful ingredients merely provides an adequate understanding of failure of community initiatives.

The failure of a community initiative differs from organisational failure in the sense that concrete bottom-lines are hardly reached: communities are tight to certain localities and cannot be disbanded when initiatives fail. A failed initiative however can have far reaching consequences for the future of a community: conflicted successes can drive communities apart and lead to a corrosion of social capital. Village boards that were unsuccessful in materialising their ideas into concrete projects can face long term inertia: they can find it difficult to reconnect with the community or higher authorities for support. However, the results also showed that communities have the potential to change and demonstrate the relativeness of failure and success. In particular, due to the influx of new resources, a changing environment or more efficient ways to transform an idea into an actual project, two of the discussed communities overwon their challenges were gradually perceived as successes.

Currently hardly any safety net is provided for initiatives that went wrong (de Haan et al., 2017b; Eversole, 2012). Instead challenged communities remain invisible and find great difficulty to apply for professional support. However, as stated before, success and failure of a community initiative often go hand in hand. Also, successful communities have known periods of failure, but learned from their mistakes and revived. Community initiatives follow organic and highly incremental development paths: sometimes a project moves forward gradually, but often ad hoc decisions are taken. It is this flexibility that makes communities resilient, but also vulnerable in cases of inadequate professional support or inefficient leadership (Cheshire, 2016; Skerratt, 2013). Therefore, it is necessary to provide institutional space for

failure and to foster recovery.

The findings of this research indicate three directions for providing institutional space for failure and recovery of community initiatives. *First*, early on professional support from NGO's and governments could prevent large errors, such as miscalculated budgets. Nearly all interviewed initiators indicated that low key support from support from frontline workers, working at local governments or NGO's, advanced their projects significantly. However too rigid expectations concerning the legitimacy and accountability of community initiatives, increase the risk of inertia (Gunn et al., 2015). *Second*, increasing the development potential for communities is another way of creating a safety net. Currently governments tend to focus on rewarding already successful initiatives with awards and funding, to accelerate community development in general. Awarding potential to change and stimulating communities that are 'not there yet' could be an inspiring change of perspective. Other studies have shown that investments in community training and general support increases social capital and resilience (Agger and Jensen, 2015; Cooper, 2006). However, how this can be done in ways that allow communities to overcome and learn from mistakes, has received little attention from policy makers or researchers so far. And *third*, the results of this study demonstrate that communities with strong developed social capital generally find ways to develop alternative strategies. However, it is important to realize that community engagement is not always feasible. Especially in depopulating contexts motivated, capable and well-networked citizens are out-migrating. This affects social capital and resilience of such communities negatively (Meijer and Sysner, 2017). So, even though community engagement is regarded as a panacea for population decline, it is unrealistic to expect all communities are able to establish successful initiatives in the future (Bock, 2016). In the end successful community engagement depends on the commitment and actions of people who live there. To what extent a safety net can be provided for organisationally weak communities and whether they eventually are able to develop initiatives remains to be seen and should be a topic for future research.

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